

Book of Mormon Witnesses, Part 3: Martin Harris

Among the favorite anti-Mormon charges is that the Three Witnesses only imagined that they saw the Book of Mormon plates. Most of the “evidence” for such an argument is based on two statements made by Martin Harris. Supposedly Harris was once asked if he saw the plates with his “naked eyes” to which he responded, “No, I saw them with a spiritual eye.”¹ In another interview Harris allegedly claimed that he only saw the plates in a “visionary or entranced state.”²

Does “visionary” mean “imaginary?” Does the belief that the experience had visionary qualities contradict the claim that the plates were real? Consider this: On separate occasions Harris also claimed that prior to his witnessing the plates he held them (while covered) “on his knee for an hour and a half”³ and that they weighed approximately fifty pounds.⁴ It seems unlikely— from his physical descriptions as well as his other testimonies and the testimonies of the other two witnesses— that the entire experience was merely in his mind. On one occasion, for example, critics charged Harris with delusion— that he had merely *imagined* to see an angel and the plates. Martin responded by extending his right hand:

Gentlemen, do you see that hand? Are you sure you see it? Are your eyes playing a trick or something? No. Well, as sure as you see my hand so sure did I see the angel and the plates.⁵

David Whitmer helps clear up the “spiritual” vs. “natural” viewing of the plates. Responding to the interviewer who questioned Harris, Whitmer replied,

Of course we were in the spirit when we had the view, for no man can behold the face of an angel, except in a spiritual view, but we were in the body also, and everything was as natural to us, as it is at any time.⁶

Paul understood the difficulty of describing spiritual experiences when he wrote:

I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) (2 Cor. 12:2-3.)

Paul’s vision was real, yet he was unsure whether he had the experience in or out of his body. Harris may have felt a similar experience. He knew the plates were real, yet he also knew that when the angel showed him the plates he was only able to see them by the power of God.

Another frequent anti-Mormon accusation is the claim that Harris was not a reliable witness since he believed in spiritualism, magic, and the visitation of angels, as well as his

involvement with various religious affiliations during his separation from Mormonism.⁷

Anyone seriously interested in the character of Martin Harris should read Richard L. Anderson’s *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*. In this book Anderson outlines the life of Harris and the fact that his neighbors and associates (most of whom disagreed with his religious views) considered him to be honest and upright. Even early anti-Mormons who knew Harris, or knew those acquainted with Harris, believed that he was “honest,” and “industrious,” “benevolent,” and a “worthy citizen.”⁸

Pomeroy Tucker, who knew Harris but didn’t believe in the Book of Mormon, once noted:

How to reconcile the act of Harris in signing his name to such a statement [his Book of Mormon testimony], in view of the character of honesty which had always been conceded to him, could never easily be explained.⁹

During the time when Harris was separated from the LDS Church, he sought for the joy he once knew in his early Mormon years by seeking it in other Christian faiths. His quest for such gospel joy led him along several paths all (except for a brief encounter with Shakerism) affiliated with some Mormon group until at last he returned to Mormonism.¹⁰ Despite the claim of the critics that his spiritual wandering showed signs of religious instability, it showed instead that once he left Mormonism he was unable to find the gospel joy he once felt but earnestly sought it until he returned to where he had started.

Some critics charge that Harris’ testimony is suspect because during his encounter with Shakerism he was reported to have commented that his belief in Shakerism was greater than it was for the Book of Mormon.¹¹ As Richard L. Anderson notes, however,

This word to the Twelve from Phineas Young and others is vague, for we do not know whether these Kirtland Mormons heard Martin Harris say this, or whether they heard it secondhand. His leaning to Shakerism is probably accurate, but Harris’s precise wording is all-important if one claims that he testified of Shakerism instead of the Book of Mormon. This “either-or” reading of the document does not fit Martin’s lifetime summary of all his interviews: “no man ever heard me in any way deny the truth of the Book of Mormon, the administration of the angel that showed me the plates.” For instance, at the same time as the above 1844 letter, Edward Bunker met Martin in the Kirtland Temple, visited his home, “and heard him bear his testimony to the truth of the Book of Mormon.” And six months later Jeremiah Cooper traveled to Kirtland and visited with Martin

Harris: “he bore testimony to the truth of the Book of Mormon.”¹²

Throughout his spiritual wandering, Harris *never* denied his testimony of the Book of Mormon. Elder Edward Stevenson, who was instrumental in later years in inducing Martin Harris to re-enter the Church in 1870 relates an experience of Martin Harris:

On one occasion several of his old acquaintances made an effort to get him tipsy by treating him to some wine. When they thought he was in a good mood for talk they put the question very carefully to him, ‘Well, now, Martin, we want you to be frank and candid with us in regard to this story of your seeing an angel and the golden plates of the Book of Mormon that are so much talked about. We have always taken you to be an honest good farmer and neighbor of ours but could not believe that you did see an angel. Now, Martin, do you really believe that you did see an angel, when you were awake?’ ‘No,’ said Martin, ‘I do not believe it.’ The crowd were delighted, but soon a different feeling prevailed, as Martin true to his trust, said, ‘Gentlemen, what I have said is true, from the fact that my belief is swallowed up in knowledge; for I want to say to you that as the Lord lives I do *know* that I stood with the Prophet Joseph Smith in the presence of the angel, and it was the brightness of day.’¹³

Martin Harris bore his testimony once again on his deathbed. Martin’s highly practical neighbor, George Godfrey, deliberately waited for a semiconscious moment to suggest that Martin’s testimony was possibly based on deception.¹⁴ Godfrey recorded the vigorous response:

A few hours before his death and when he was so weak and enfeebled that he was unable to recognize me or anyone, and knew not to whom he was speaking, I asked him if he did not feel that there was an element at least, of fraudulence and deception in the things that were written and told of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and he replied as he had always done so many, many times in my hearing the same spirit he always manifested when enjoying health and vigor and said: ‘The Book of Mormon is no fake. I know what I know. I have seen what I have seen and I have heard what I have heard. I have seen the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon is written. An angel appeared to me and others and testified to the truthfulness of the record, and had I been willing to have perjured myself and sworn falsely to the testimony I now bear I could have been a rich man, but I could not have testified other than I have done and am now doing for these things are true.’¹⁵

Harris knew the truth and would not deny it. Anyone sincerely investigating the Book of Mormon must come to terms with the testimony proclaimed and maintained by an

honest Martin Harris as well as Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer.



For more details on this topic see
<http://www.mormonfortress.com/harris1.html>

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¹ Wilford C. Wood, *Joseph Smith Begins His Work*, Vol. 1, 1958, intro.

² Anthony Metcalf, *Ten Years Before the Mast*, n.d., microfilm copy, p. 70–71; quoted in Dale Morgan, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986).

³ *Millennial Star* September 15, 1853; quoted in George Reynolds and Janne Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1959), 4:436.

⁴ *Tiffany's Monthly* 5, no. 2 (New York: Joel Tiffany, 1859), 166.

⁵ Richard L. Anderson (1981), *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1981), 116.

⁶ Letter of David Whitmer to Anthony Metcalf, March 1887, cit. Anthony Metcalf, *Ten Years Before the Mast* (Malad, Idaho, 1888), 74; quoted in Anderson, 86.

⁷ For a discussion on early LDS associations with “magic” see <http://www.mormonfortress.com/seer1.html>

⁸ Richard L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1981), 96–98.

⁹ *Palmyra Courier* (May 24, 1872), as quoted in Anderson, 104.

¹⁰ Anderson, 111.

¹¹ Phineas Young letter, Dec. 31, 1844, Kirtland, Ohio, quoted in Anderson, 164.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Letter of Elder Edward Stevenson to the *Millennial Star* quoted in William Edwin Berrett, *The Restored Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1974), 57–58; italics added.

¹⁴ Anderson, 117.

¹⁵ George Godfrey, “Testimony of Martin Harris,” from an unpublished manuscript copy in the possession of his daughter, Florence (Godfrey) Munson of Fielding, Utah; quoted in Eldin Ricks, *The Case of the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1971), 65–66.